

Nazi Decontextualization of the Bible

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Abstract: *When spreading antisemitic ideology, Hitler and his followers sometimes turned to the Bible to verify and support their hatred of the Jews. Passages such as “you are of your father the devil,” were used to encourage Bible-believing Christians that Jesus himself was antisemitic and that those who held antipathy towards the Jews were following Jesus’s legacy. However, many of these passages that the Nazis used to support their antisemitism were taken out of context and the original intent of the author was ignored. Anti-Jewish Christian expositors also ignored the contexts of Biblical passages—expositors both during the time of the Nazis and earlier. This article will consider this decontextualization of the Bible by the Nazis and anti-Jewish theologians. It suggests that if the original meaning of the text has been obscured by decontextualization, the solution is not to reject the text as anti-Jewish, but rather to reevaluate the anti-Jewish interpretation and recontextualize the passage.*

Keywords: Christian-Jewish Relations, Anti-Judaism, Nazi Theology, Christian Antisemitism, Biblical Context

Introduction

Hitler and the Nazis quoted from and alluded to the Bible in order to support their position against the Jews. Multiple times, Hitler quoted the Bible in *Mein Kampf*. And perhaps upon that basis, he made the assertion that he was “fighting the work of the Lord.”¹ At the same time, it is crucial to recognize that these Biblical assertions were not without consequences—in 1939, Germany was a nation that was almost entirely Christian.² Christian rhetoric and Biblical quotations had the power to sway crowds, entice Christian followers, and justify anti-Christian behavior as Christian. Yet how could that really be possible? How could one use the Bible,

¹ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 65.

² Evans, *The Third Reich at War*, 546.

a book with the central message of “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18; Matt 22:39), to support the hatred and eventual murder of millions? Could it be that the Bible itself taught the hatred of the Jews?

In fact, the exact opposite was and is true. Both the Old and the New Testaments of the Bible speak unabashedly about God’s love for the Jews—declaring them to be God’s holy people and a special treasure. In the Hebrew Bible, Jeremiah wrote:

Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—the LORD of hosts is his name: ‘If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the LORD, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever.’ Thus says the LORD: ‘If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth below can be explored, then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done, declares the LORD.’ (Jer 31:35–37)³

Such was the inviolability of God’s relationship with Israel. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul cautioned the believers in Rome about any animosity that they might hold towards Judaism—again affirming God’s relationship with Israel: “But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you” (Rom 11:17–18). Thus, the believers had been grafted into the Jewish tree—and while some of the Jewish branches had been broken off because of unbelief, the Jewish tree was still alive and was the very basis through which the believers in Rome could have a relationship with God. The root supported them, not the other way around.

How, then, could Hitler and the Nazis use the Bible to condemn the Jews? This article will pursue that question—looking first at the way that the Bible was used by Nazis against the Jews, and then considering how the foundation had been laid for this anti-Jewish misuse of Scripture within Christianity itself in both antiquity and leading up to the modern era. Overall, it will emphasize that both Nazis and Christians throughout the ages took passages of the Bible out of their context in order to use them against the Jews. This decontextualization of Scripture was done in multiple ways, and

³ All Bible quotations are taken from the *English Standard Version*.

oftentimes, in multiple ways at once—ignoring typical principles of Biblical exegesis. Gordon Fee explains the exegetical process:

The term Exegesis is used in this book in a consciously limited sense to refer to the historical investigation into the meaning of the biblical text. The presupposition lying behind this task is that the biblical books had ‘authors’ and ‘readers,’ and that the authors intended their readers to understand what they wrote (see, e.g., 1 Cor 5:9–11; 1 John 2:1; see the Appendix). Exegesis therefore answers the question, What did the biblical author mean?⁴

In order to better grasp authorial intent, Fee defines multiple aspects of context: the historical context, or the situation that initially prompted the writing or that the writing describes; and literary context, or the text that surrounds the verse or chapter under consideration. He also suggests that exegetes consider the “Biblical context” or the meta-narrative created by the compilation of the Biblical books and the examination of what these books emphasize.⁵ Interpretation of a passage should harmonize with the overall narrative created by the other books of Scripture. All three of these contexts work to create a framework through which a passage can be understood.

Unfortunately, these three types of context were ignored by the Nazis, and even before the Nazis, at times by influential Christian theologians. In this way, the foundation was laid for the Christian masses to misunderstand the author’s intent throughout their Scriptures, and most crucially, in passages that appeared to condemn the Jews. This not only created a lacuna in Christians’ understanding of their own theology, but had tragic consequences for the relationship between Christians and Jews, oftentimes validating Christian murder of the Jews or antipathy towards them. This article will consider first the Nazi decontextualization of the Bible, then the Christian decontextualization of the Bible—examining specific passages, the interpretation given to them, and then the interpretation provided by their context.

⁴ Fee, *New Testament Exegesis*, 25.

⁵ Fee & Stuart, *How to Read the Bible Book by Book*, 9.

Nazi Use of the Bible

Hitler and the Bible

Nazi propagandists and Nazi theologians both used the Bible to promote the Nazi stance against the Jews. This portion of the article will first consider the ways that the former used Scripture, and then the ways that the latter used it—noting that consistently, Biblical passages were taken out of their historical, literary, and Biblical context. This made the passages appear to support a purpose that they did not actually encourage.

This utter decontextualization of Scripture can be seen over and over in Hitler's use of the Bible. Throughout *Mein Kampf*, Hitler uses the Bible as though it is simply full of interesting dictums and principled phrases—thus, when referring to the election process, Hitler stated that “Sooner will a camel pass through a needle's eye than a great man be ‘discovered’ by an election.”⁶ The first portion of Hitler's sentence is a reference to Jesus's words about rich people entering the kingdom of God (Matt 19:24)—Jesus states that it is “easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle” than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Hitler simply took a phrase from Scripture and used it as though it was a phrase that could be applied to any situation. Hitler did this repeatedly in his speeches as well: he quoted passages from the Bible as though they applied perfectly to his own day, without any recognition of their contexts.⁷ This was certainly the case when Hitler spoke and wrote about the Jews. At least twice in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler quoted the Bible when discussing the Jews,

⁶ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 88.

⁷ On April 10, 1923, Hitler spoke in Munich: “In the Bible we find the text, ‘That which is neither hot nor cold will I spew out of my mouth.’ This utterance of the great Nazarene has kept its profound validity until the present day. He who would pursue the golden mean must surrender the hope of achieving the great and the greatest aims.” Adolf Hitler, quoted from Norman Baynes, *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, April 1922–August 1939* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1969), 43. This is a quotation from Revelation 3, in which Jesus used the analogy of lukewarm water to explain that he desired his followers to avoid being lukewarm about faith. In *Mein Kampf*, Hitler again quoted the Bible as though it was a book of helpful sayings: “Verily a man cannot serve two masters. And I consider the foundation or destruction of a religion far greater than the foundation or destruction of a state, let alone a party.” Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 114. Here, he argued, a man cannot serve both a religion and a political party—and he used Jesus's words “a man cannot serve two masters” (Matt 6:24) to support his argument. While Jesus's words can be taken from their specific context here, since they indeed appear to be supporting a specific principle of one master (even though Jesus was not referring to political parties as a master), this again serves to illustrate how Hitler used the Bible. He simply quoted from it as though it was full of useful maxims.

yet his quotations were simply sayings found in Scripture that he was using as though they were axioms. Speaking about his image of “the Jew,” Hitler wrote:

First, therefore, he goes about making up to the people for his previous sins against them. He begins his career as the ‘benefactor’ of mankind. Since his new benevolence has a practical foundation, he cannot very well adhere to the old Biblical recommendation, that the left hand should not know what the right hand giveth; no, whether he likes it or not, he must reconcile himself to letting as many people as possible know how deeply he feels the sufferings of the masses and all the sacrifices that he himself is making to combat them.⁸

In this, Hitler quoted Matthew 6:3, “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing”—but again, he quoted it as a wise saying, without any regard for the historical, literary, and Biblical context of the phrase. Hitler did the same when he quoted “You cannot drive out the Devil with Beelzebub” in relation to standing against his perception of the Jewish and Soviet threat.⁹

And yet, perhaps where this complete disregard for context becomes the most pernicious is in Hitler’s allusions to the Bible. In these passages, by simply alluding to the stories in the Bible, his connection to Scripture and its context is even more distant, and his wresting of Biblical incidents is even less apparent to his readers or listeners: “When I go out in the morning and see these men standing in their queues and look into their pinched faces, then I believe I would be no Christian, but a very devil, if I felt no pity for them, if I did not, as did our Lord two thousand years ago, turn against those by whom today this poor people is plundered and exploited.”¹⁰ In this 1922 speech, Hitler referred to Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple—yet there is no explanation of how this event specifically related to what Hitler was seeing and experiencing. Instead, he expected his audience to understand that Jesus driving the moneychangers out of the temple was *Jesus driving the Jews* out of the temple—those whom Hitler believed were the ones who “plundered and exploited” the Germans. Nevertheless, this goes completely against the historical context of the passage—since Jesus himself was a Jew, the literary context of the passage as it states that Jesus drove out the *moneychangers* and

⁸ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 313.

⁹ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 662.

¹⁰ Hitler, April 12, 1922 in Munich, quoted from Baynes, *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, April 1922–August 1939*, 20.

those who bought and sold in the temple (Matt. 21:12, Jn. 2:14; if he drove out the Jews, he would have essentially driven *everyone* out of the temple). The Biblical context, as noted earlier, does not support the view that Jesus stood against the Jews. A few months later, Hitler made another allusion to the story of Jesus: “Just as the Jew could once incite the mob of Jerusalem against Christ, so today he must succeed in inciting folk who have been duped into madness to attack those who, God’s Truth! Seek to deal with this people in utter honesty and sincerity.”¹¹ The inciting of the mob is a very specific instance referred to in Matthew 27:20–24—and again, this incident is taken out of all of its contexts. Matthew’s literary context is very specific: rather than stating that it was *the Jews* that incited the mob in Jerusalem, it says that the *chief priests* incited the mob. Thus, the passage does not place the focus on all of the Jews. Finally, in another passage in *Mein Kampf*, Hitler returned to the instance of Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple:

His life is only of this world, and his spirit is inwardly as alien to true Christianity as his nature two thousand years previous was to the great founder of the new doctrine. Of course, the latter made no secret of his attitude toward the Jewish people, and when necessary he even took to the whip to drive from the temple of the Lord this adversary of all humanity, who then as always saw in religion nothing but an instrument for his business existence. In return, Christ was nailed to the cross.¹²

This links two incidents—connecting Jesus’s cleansing of the temple with his crucifixion. The decontextualization of the former has already been considered, and regarding the latter, there is absolutely no indication in the gospels that Jesus was crucified “in return” for what he did in the temple. The literary context of his crucifixion shows accusations brought against him that connected to destroying the temple—but not cleansing it (Matt. 26:61).

Throughout his speeches and *Mein Kampf*, Hitler used the Bible repeatedly. And yet, this was simply a cursory use—it was a wresting of Scripture for his own ends. Never did he seek to provide a clear exposition of a passage, nor did he attempt to elucidate the principles beneath a set of verses. Instead, he quoted Scripture as though it was a compilation of dictums, and completely decontextualized Biblical events when he alluded to them—leading

¹¹ Hitler, July 28, 1922 in Munich, quoted from Baynes, *The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, April 1922–August 1939*, 37.

¹² Hitler; *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 307.

to allusions that were simply wrong. And yet, this disregard for the various contexts of Biblical passages—and resulting fictitious conclusions—were not simply confined to Hitler.

German Theologians and the Bible

One of the major arguments that theologians made against Judaism was in regard to the Judaism of Jesus himself. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who was more of a philosopher than a theologian, argued that

It was Simon Tharsi, one of the Maccabeans, who, after a successful campaign in Galilee against the Syrians, ‘gathered together the Jews who lived there and bade them emigrate [*sic*] and settle bag and baggage in Judea.’ Moreover the prejudice against Galilee remained so strong among the Jews that, when Herod Antipas during Christ’s youth had built the city of Tiberias and tried to get Jews to settle there, neither promises nor threats were of any avail. There is, accordingly, as we see, not the slightest foundation for the supposition that Christ’s parents were of Jewish descent.¹³

Except for the fact that the Biblical records of Jesus clearly show a genealogical record that is Jewish. Nevertheless, this belief was believed by well-known German theologians, such as Emanuel Hirsch, who argued that the Jewish proportion population of Galilee would have only been approximately 10% at the time that Jesus was born.¹⁴ And thus, as German theologians attempted to strip Jesus of his Jewish identity, they were forced to once again decontextualize the Bible: “As German theologians revised the New Testament to demonstrate that Jesus was not a Jew but an Aryan, they argued that they were recapturing the authentic gospel that had been falsified by the Jews.”¹⁵ One of the main Jews whom they blamed for this falsification was Paul, leading them to remove Jesus from the Biblical and Pauline context in which his story appears.¹⁶

Further, Nazi theologians attempted to argue that Jesus himself was anti-Jewish—and therefore, not only should his followers be anti-Jewish, but he certainly couldn’t have been Jewish. Gerhard Kittel, an influential German theologian, wrote: “Never has a more terrible judgment been spoken against the

¹³ Chamberlain, *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, 206.

¹⁴ Erickson, *Theologians Under Hitler*, 164.

¹⁵ Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, 50.

¹⁶ Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, 50–51.

so-called world Jewry as a demand for power than in the ‘woe’ of Jesus Christ in Matthew 23:15; never a more negative characterization of the Jewish religion as a religion of privilege than that found in John 8:40–44!”¹⁷ And yet again, these passages are removed from their context—Matthew 23 is said to be spoken about “world Jewry,” when Jesus was speaking specifically against the Pharisees, and John 8 is said to be about the “Jewish religion,” when Jesus was speaking against those Jews specifically—not against their religion. Adolf von Harnack saw a similar anti-Jewish streak within Jesus’ message. In his consideration of the origins of Christianity, he attempted to argue that Christianity had Greek roots, not Jewish ones. He saw Jesus’s movement as against the Jewish character: “There is hardly any fact as certain as the fact that the religion of Jesus could not fasten to any roots within Jewish and Semitic ground. There must have been something in this religion that is related to the free Greek spirit. In a certain sense, Christianity has remained Greek until the present day.”¹⁸

Thus, German theologians and philosophers made specific passages general, removing them from their literary and historical contexts, and the Biblical background of the Hebrew Bible was ignored. Over and over, this was the method for those who attempted to attack Judaism on the basis of the Bible—the Bible had to be decontextualized in order for it to be an effective weapon against Judaism. The same was the case when an entire movement, not just theologians, attempted to remove Judaism and its influences from Christianity.

The German Christian Movement

The major Protestant church in Germany when the Nazis came to power was the *Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland* (EKD), and this church was comprised of various factions. One of the main factions was the *Deutsche Christen*, or German Christians, eventually encompassing approximately 25%–33% of the EKD.¹⁹ The German Christians stood ardently against Judaism and attempted to use the Bible to support their beliefs—specifically arguing that Jesus was not a Jew and that Jesus’s message was anti-Jewish. Thus Bergen quotes a German Christian who attempted to use Biblical quotations to support his anti-Jewish message: “A ‘murderer,’ a ‘liar,’ a ‘father of lies.’ It is

¹⁷ Kittel, quoted in Erickson, “The Case of Gerhard Kittel,” *Theologians Under Hitler*, 42.

¹⁸ von Harnack, quoted in Heschel, “Draining Jesus of Jewishness,” *The Aryan Jesus*, 63.

¹⁹ Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus*, 3–4.

impossible to reject Jehovah and his Old Testament in sharper terms!”²⁰ When the same individual sought to explain various passages that seemed to support Judaism, his argument rested upon decontextualizing Jesus’s words from the rest of the Bible and redacting the Biblical text itself: “In places, he admitted, the gospels seem to suggest the opposite. But those were not the words of Christ, he contended; they were ‘lies,’ ‘Jewishness,’ the ‘voice of the Old Testament.’”²¹ Thus, German Christians and their forerunners pushed to have the Hebrew Bible removed from worship entirely and sought to remove Hebraisms like “hallelujah” and “hosanna” from their hymnbook—effectively removing the New Testament completely from both its historical and Biblical context.²²

But where did this all come from? How was it that this decontextualized use of Scripture and this call to entirely remove the New Testament from its own context was even tolerated? Why was it not obvious that this was twisted exegesis? Perhaps part of the problem was that a similar type of exposition of Scripture had been used for centuries within Christendom, particularly in relation to the Jews. The German Christians unabashedly proclaimed Martin Luther’s treatise “On the Jews and Their Lies” and encouraged their followers to be like Luther.²³ Hitler himself described Luther as one of the “great warriors in this world.”²⁴ Perhaps centuries of decontextualized exposition of Scripture about the Jews had led to a culture within Germany (and perhaps throughout Europe) in which sloppy quotations and allusions to the Bible in anti-Jewish hate speech were simply the norm.

Laying the Foundation

By the time of the Nazis, Christian Europe had developed a robust system of anti-Judaism that was built upon misquoting Scripture—and specifically decontextualizing Scripture. To demonstrate this misuse of Scripture, this article will examine the Scriptural decontextualization of two highly influential anti-Jewish Christians: John Chrysostom and Martin Luther.

²⁰ Schiellmeyer, quoted in Bergen, “Storm Troopers of Christ,” in *Betrayal*, 55.

²¹ Schiellmeyer, quoted in Bergen, “Storm Troopers of Christ,” in *Betrayal*, 55.

²² Bergen, “Storm Troopers of Christ,” in *Betrayal*, 47, 52–53.

²³ Bergen, “Storm Troopers of Christ,” in *Betrayal*, 47.

²⁴ Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 213.

John Chrysostom

An early example of this misuse of Scripture is found in the preaching of John Chrysostom (349–407 ce), the Archbishop of Constantinople. Note his fairly extensive use of Scripture in this invective:

But what is the source of this hardness? It comes from gluttony and drunkenness. Who says so? Moses himself. ‘Israel ate and was filled and the darling grew fat and frisky.’ When brute animals feed from a full manger, they grow plump and become more obstinate and hard to hold in check; they endure neither the yoke, the reins, nor the hand of the charioteer. Just so the Jewish people were driven by their drunkenness and plumpness to the ultimate evil; they kicked about, they failed to accept the yoke of Christ, nor did they pull the plow of his teaching. Another prophet hinted at this when he said: ‘Israel is as obstinate as a stubborn heifer.’ And still another called the Jews ‘an untamed calf.’

Although such beasts are unfit for work, they are fit for killing. And this is what happened to the Jews: while they were making themselves unfit for work, they grew fit for slaughter. This is why Christ said: ‘But as for these my enemies, who did not want me to be king over them, bring them here and slay them.’²⁵

In this passage, Chrysostom quoted Scripture four times—and yet each of these quotations is a misinterpretation. “Israel ate and was filled and the darling grew fat and frisky” is a quotation of Deuteronomy 32:15, and yet there are numerous problems with the way that Chrysostom uses this passage. First, he uses it as proof that Israel became stubborn and hard towards God because of gluttony and drunkenness. Yet that isn’t what the passage itself says. The passage states that God gave Israel many good things—and that by taking these gifts for granted and forgetting that God gave them to them, they forsook their God. Their fatness is not the source of the forgetting; the forgetting is the source of the fatness. Further, Chrysostom uses this quotation as a means by which he can condemn the Jews to complete destruction—yet that wasn’t the purpose of the passage. In the literary context, Moses’s song makes it clear that Israel is God’s special people: “But the LORD’s portion is his people, Jacob his allotted

²⁵ Chrysostom, *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*, trans. Paul Harkins (Washington: Catholic University of America Press 1979), 8.

heritage” (Deut 32:9). The passage was removed from its literary context—though God will judge his people, they remain his people.

“Israel is as obstinate as a stubborn heifer” is a quotation of Hosea 4:16, and yet again is taken entirely out of its literary and historical context. Hosea was a prophet during the time of the divided kingdom, with the Kingdom of Judah in the south and the Kingdom of Israel in the north. The quoted verse is specifically about the Kingdom of Israel as the verse before contrasts Judah and Israel with one another. Though Hosea was referring to the Kingdom of Israel at that time, Chrysostom used this quotation as though it was applicable to all Jews, all of the time. And yet, Hosea’s prophecy itself disproves this exegesis: repeatedly, Hosea stresses that though God cast off various generations of Israel and Judah for their unfaithfulness, God has not cast them off forever (Hos 2:14–23, 11:8–11, 14:4–7).

“An untamed calf” is a quotation of Jeremiah 31:18, which is perhaps one of the prime chapters that assert God’s unfailing love for Israel (as noted in the introduction). This verse is part of that entire exposition—part of God declaring how God worked with Ephraim in order to restore their relationship! Even further, the verse itself says that God disciplined Ephraim as an untamed calf, for the purpose of converting him, and the end result of the discipline in this verse is Ephraim’s faithful declaration: “for you are the LORD my God.” Using this passage to slander the Jews is completely the opposite of what was intended by the passage. This verse is all about restoration.

“But as for these my enemies, who did not want me to be king over them, bring them here and slay them” is a quotation of Luke 19:27, which is the final verse in Jesus’s Parable of the Minas. But once again, the verse is taken out of context. According to Luke, the Parable of the Minas was told for a very specific purpose: “He proceeded to tell a parable, because he was near to Jerusalem, and because they supposed that the kingdom of God was to appear immediately” (Luke 19:11). In other words, the purpose of this parable was to explain that the kingdom of God was not coming anytime soon. Instead, as the parable showed, the nobleman would go “into a far country” (v. 12) and then would return. It was during the time of the nobleman’s journey that he was rejected by his citizens. Thus, the timing doesn’t match up with the rejection of Jesus by the Jews of his generation. Jesus was rejected during his lifetime, so perhaps the principle can be applied to the Jewish rulers of the time, who indeed did not want Jesus to reign over them, but the exact application of this parable cannot be to them, nor can it be about all Jews all of the time as Chrysostom asserts. Instead, Jesus specified that these people were “his citizens”—in other words, part of his kingdom over which he will rule in earnest when he comes

again. These must be followers of Jesus who have had Jesus as their king and have determined that they no longer want his headship. These are the ones who will experience a day of reckoning at Jesus's return. Even if this was about the religious rulers at the time of Christ, the historical context restricts it so that it cannot possibly be about all Jews as Chrysostom applies it.

Each of these uses in Chrysostom's attack on the Jews is taken from its context. Tragically, despite his lack of contextual exegesis, Chrysostom was an incredibly influential Christian thinker, who is still held in high regard.

Martin Luther

In this final section, this study will consider one further theologian whose work perhaps had the greatest influence on German Christianity: Martin Luther. Luther's theology regarding the Jews was heavily influenced by other medieval theologians around him, so perhaps this study of Luther's use of Scripture about the Jews also helps to elucidate the views of others of his time.²⁶

In *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Luther was scathing in the way that he referred to the Jews. He wrote, "They were a defiled bride, yes, an irredeemable whore and evil slut, with whom God was always forced to scuffle, struggle, and fight."²⁷ This description of Judaism does indeed find a parallel in the Hebrew prophets. Jeremiah wrote: "The LORD said to me in the days of King Josiah: 'Have you seen what she did, that faithless one, Israel, how she went up on every high hill and under every green tree, and there played the whore?'" (Jer. 3:6). Ezekiel wrote similarly: "You played the whore also with the Assyrians, because you were not satisfied; yes, you played the whore with them, and still you were not satisfied" (Ezek 16:28). And yet Jeremiah and Ezekiel have crucial contexts that make it so that their language cannot just be taken and applied to the Jews of Luther's day. Jeremiah's chapter, while focusing on Israel and Judah's whoredom, is a chapter about *hope*. It declares: "In those days the house of Judah shall join the house of Israel, and together they shall come from the land of the north to the land that I gave your fathers for a heritage" (Jer 3:18). Ezekiel's prophecy has the same message: "Yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish for you an everlasting covenant" (Ezek 16:60). However, the historical context is also specifically about the Jews during the times of these prophets—not all Jews, as Luther would have his readers think.

²⁶ Probst, *Demonizing the Jews*, 46.

²⁷ Luther, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, trans. Tryntje Helfferich (Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 2018), 293.

Repeatedly, Luther's words about the Jews have Scriptural parallels, yet the Scripture is taken out of context. In another instance, Luther wrote, "Still, they have not bent their iron necks (as Isaiah called them), nor have their brass foreheads blushed with shame. They remain always completely and totally blind, obdurate, and rigid, always hoping God would once again bring them home and return everything to them."²⁸ This, as Luther says, is a reference to Isaiah: "Because I know that you are obstinate, and your neck is an iron sinew and your forehead brass" (Isa 48:4). While this chapter of Isaiah's prophecy is filled with condemnation for Israel's stubbornness, it is also a passage filled with hope for Israel! "Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'I am the LORD your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go'" (Isa 48:17). Their Redeemer would indeed redeem them: "Go out from Babylon, flee from Chaldea, declare this with a shout of joy, proclaim it, send it out to the end of the earth; say, 'The LORD has redeemed his servant Jacob!' They did not thirst when he led them through the deserts; he made water flow for them from the rock; he split the rock and the water gushed out" (Isa 48:20–21). Despite Isaiah's condemnation of Israel *at that time*, the prophet also envisioned a redeemed Israel with an unbroken and revitalized relationship with God. Yet Luther ignored this context and focused solely on the condemnation.

It would appear that he did this knowingly. Probst comments: "While Luther is aware of the objection that the Jews of biblical times and the Jews of his day should be distinguished from each other, he nonetheless frequently applies scriptural condemnation of the Jews of ancient Israel to contemporary Jews."²⁹ In other words, Luther was aware of the historical context.

Indeed, before he penned *On the Jews and Their Lies*, he wrote: "Christ was a genuine Jew of Abraham's seed."³⁰ He also wrote, "If the apostles, who were also Jews, had dealt with us Gentiles as we Gentiles do with the Jews, there would never have been a Christian among the Gentiles"—a powerful declaration which shows that he knew the historical context of the New Testament, and yet ignored it when writing his later polemical works.³¹

²⁸ Luther, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, trans. Tryntje Helfferich (Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 2018), 294.

²⁹ Probst, *Demonizing the Jews*, 48.

³⁰ Luther quoted in Probst, *Demonizing the Jews*, 47.

³¹ Luther, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*, trans. Tryntje Helfferich (Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 2018), 145.

Thus, highly influential Christian thinkers decontextualized Scripture when expounding about the position of the Jews, perhaps laying the foundation for the accepted misuse of Scripture by the Nazis so many years later.

Conclusion

In bringing all of this together, it is clear that both Hitler and his followers misused the Bible—taking passages out of their historical, literary, and Biblical contexts when referring to the Jews in order to convince those who held the Bible in high esteem that Scripture supported the Nazi position. Perhaps they were able to get away with this wresting of Scripture because this form of decontextualized misinterpretation of Biblical passages about Jews had become part of the Christian tradition. This article has examined some of the polemical quotations and allusions by John Chrysostom and Martin Luther and considered how these quotations consistently are used out of context, just like the use of Scripture by Nazi theologians. What is needed to establish a stronger pattern is further study of the writings of other Christian theologians.

If this pattern can indeed be found, the implication is powerful: not only have Christians taught incorrectly about Jews for centuries—which is readily acknowledged—but Christians have misunderstood their own Scriptures for centuries. Not only, then, should Christians reevaluate their teaching in order to consider the impact of those doctrines in actions, but the very basis of those doctrines should be reconsidered. In other words, perhaps Christianity needs to reexamine its own holy text focusing this time on the historical, literary, and Biblical contexts of the passages

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